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The Man – Robert Burns

Address of

Andrew Stewart

Before the

Boston Scottish Society

January 25th, 1913

Address delivered before the
Boston Scottish Society
January 25th, 1913, by

Andrew Stewart

*“No poet, since the Psalmist of Israel, ever gave the
world more assurance of a Man.”*

— ANDREW LANG.



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“It has been your peculiar fortune to capture the hearts of a whole people — a people not usually prone to praise, but devoted with a personal and patriotic loyalty to you and to your reputation.”

— ANDREW LANG — *Letters to Dead Authors.*

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OCT 17 1912



THE MAN — ROBERT BURNS

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Members of the Boston Scottish Society and Friends :

Robert Burns, in 1786, when he was twenty-seven years old, wrote from Edinburgh to his friend, Gavin Hamilton, at Mauchline, in this half-facetious, half-satirical manner :

“ For my own affairs I am in a fair way of becoming as eminent as Thomas à Kempis or John Bunyan ; and you may expect henceforth to see my birthday inserted among the wonderful events in the poor Robin’s and Aberdeen Almanacks, along with the Black Monday and the Battle of Bothwell Bridge.”

Knowing as we do now his deathless fame, nothing about this prediction is so remarkable as its extreme modesty. One hundred and twenty-seven years have fled since then, and to-night throughout the world tens of thousands of men and women are listening to words of admiration and affection for Robert Burns, poet of Scotland, but more than that and much better than that, poet of Humanity as no other is.

Few men have been more talked about, and yet, after all the talk, more misunderstood. Often on one hand has been unreasoning adulation and, on the other, unreasonable criticism, with the result that people's minds are not clear as to what manner of man he really was.

I have had just one desire as I have thought about what I would best say here to-night, and that has been that it might be something that would result in others' seeing this man as I believe he was, truly and intrinsically. And so I decided not to speak about him, but rather to have him speak to you for himself. Surely you will listen to him when you might not care to listen to me. Surely you will believe him when you might consider me mistaken.

Now, to begin with, I should like to have you observe what his attitude was toward his own shortcomings, and also what it was toward the failings of others.

We find him writing to a friend in 1787 :

“I lie so miserably open to the inroads and incursions of a mischievous, light armed, well mounted banditti, under the banners of imagination, whim, caprice and passion; and the heavy armed veteran regulars of wisdom, prudence and fore-thought, move so very very slow, that I am almost in a state of perpetual warfare, and, alas frequent defeat.”

Again he writes :

“I have been this morning taking a peep through, as Young finely says, ‘the dark postern of time long elapsed;’ ’twas a rueful prospect! My life reminded me of a ruined temple. What strength, what proportion

in some parts, what unsightly gaps, what prostrate ruins in others. I kneeled down before the Father of Mercies and said, 'Father, I have sinned against Heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.'"

Upon another occasion he said :

"I have often observed in the course of my experience of human life that every man, even the worst, has something good about him; though very often nothing else than a happy temperament of constitution inclining him to this or that virtue. For this reason no man can say in what degree any other person besides himself can be with strict justice called wicked. Let any of the strictest character for regularity of conduct among us examine impartially how many vices he has never been guilty of, not from any care or vigilance but for want of opportunity, or some accidental circumstance intervening; how many of the weaknesses of mankind he has escaped because he was out of the line of such temptation; and what often, if not always, weighs more than all the rest how much he is indebted to the world's good opinion, because the world does not know all; I say any man who can thus think, will scan the failings, nay, the faults and crimes of mankind around him with a brother's eye."

Such profound sorrow for one's own offences and such generous charity for the sins of others I have not frequently observed.

I think you will agree with me that a man without a sense of responsibility and obligation does not deserve respect and should not have it. Where did Robert Burns stand on this important matter? Writing from Ellisland to Miss Chalmers in 1788 about his marriage to Jean Armour he said:

“Shortly after my last return to Ayrshire I married ‘my Jean.’ This was not in consequence of the attachment of romance perhaps, but I had a much loved fellow creature’s happiness or misery in my determination, and I durst not trifle with so important a deposit.”

And in a letter to John Ballantine he wrote:

“I have still this favorable symptom of grace, that when my conscience, as in the case of this letter, tells me I am leaving something undone that I ought to do, it teazes me eternally till I do it.”

In the attempt I have made to get at the heart of this man, nothing I have found has appealed to me more than his sympathy with the struggles of others. He wrote in 1790 to Crauford Tait of Edinburgh a letter of introduction for a young friend William Duncan by name, in which he said:

“You my dear Sir were born under kinder stars, but your fraternal sympathy I well know can enter into the feelings of the young man who goes into life with the laudable ambition to do something, and to be something among his fellow creatures, but whom the consciousness of friendless obscurity presses to

the earth and wounds to the soul! What pleasure is in the power of the fortunate and the happy, by their notice and patronage to brighten the countenance and glad the heart of such depressed youth! I am not so angry with mankind for their deaf economy of the purse: — the goods of this world cannot be divided without being lessened — but why be a niggard of that which bestows bliss on a fellow-creature yet takes nothing from our own means of enjoyment? We wrap ourselves up in the cloak of our own better fortune, and turn away our eyes, lest the wants and woes of our brother-mortals should disturb the selfish apathy of our souls!”

And to another he wrote :

“I do not see that the turn of mind — of one who spends the hours and thoughts which the vocations of the day can spare, with Ossian, Shakespeare, Thomson, Shenstone, Sterne, etc. — I say I do not see that the turn of mind and pursuits of such a one are in the least more inimical to the sacred interests of piety and virtue than the even lawful bustling and straining after the world’s riches and honors; and I do not see but he may gain heaven as well; — as he who straining straight forward and perhaps spattering all about him gains some of life’s little eminences, where after all, he can only see and be seen a little more conspicuously than what in the pride of his heart he is apt to term the poor indolent devil he has left behind him.”

And in an immortal prayer which he has left us, — which

in itself ought to have been enough to have kept him from being misunderstood, — he said :

“Thou, Almighty Author of peace and goodness and love! do thou give me the social heart that kindly tastes of every man’s cup. Is it a draught of joy? — warm and open my heart to share it with cordial, unenvying rejoicing. Is it the bitter potion of sorrow? Melt my heart with sincerely sympathetic woe! Above all, do thou give me the manly mind, that resolutely exemplifies, in life and manners, those sentiments which I would wish to possess.”

Nothing about Burns was more Scottish than his aggressive pride and independence. In respect to this he asserted :

“We ought, when we wish to be economists in happiness, we ought, in the first place, to fix the standard of our own character, and when on full examination, we know where we stand and how much ground we occupy, let us contend for it as property.”

Writing in 1793 to Clarinda about the neglect of him by his one-time closest friend, Robert Ainslie, he said :

“I had a letter from my old friend a while ago, but it was so dry, so distant, so like a card to one of his clients, that I could scarce bear to read it. He is a good honest fellow; and can write a friendly letter, which would do equal honor to his head and his heart, as a whole sheaf of his letters I have by me will witness; and though fame does

not blow her trumpet at my approach now, as she did then, when he first honored me with his friendship, yet I am as proud as ever; and when I am laid in my grave, I wish to be stretched at my full length, that I may occupy every inch of ground which I have a right to."

Some one has said that "gratitude is a lively sense of favors to come." Often altogether too true! But what a splendid example of gratitude and loyalty did Burns set us in his attitude toward his patron Lord Glencairn. He writes :

"I have found a worthy, warm friend in Mr. Dalrymple of Orangefield, who introduced me to Lord Glencairn, a man whose worth and brotherly-kindness to me I shall remember when time shall be no more."

In a letter to Lady Glencairn he said :

"When I am tempted to do anything improper, I dare not, because I look upon myself as accountable to Your Ladyship and family. Now and then when I have the honor to be called to the tables of the great, if I happen to meet with any mortification from the stately stupidity of self-sufficient squires, or the luxurious indolence of upstart nabobs, I get above the creatures by calling to remembrance that I am patronized by the noble house of Glencairn."

And how drenched in sadness and woe is the letter he wrote to an official of the Glencairn household at the time of Lord Glencairn's death :

“ God knows what I have suffered, at the loss of my best friend, my first, my dearest patron and benefactor ; the man to whom I owe all that I am and have ! I am gone into mourning for him, and with more sincerity of grief than I fear some will, who by nature’s ties ought to feel on the occasion.

“ I see that the honored remains of my noble patron are designed to be brought to the family burial place. Dare I trouble you to let me know privately before the day of interment, that I may cross the country and steal among the crowd to pay a tear to the last sight of my ever revered benefactor.”

How any one with any real knowledge of Robert Burns and at the same time any real conception of religion could ever have considered him irreligious is simply beyond my comprehension. In one of his numerous letters to Clarinda he made this statement :

“ I will lay before you the outlines of my belief. He who is our Author and Preserver, and will one day be our Judge, must be (not for his sake in the way of duty, but from the native impulse of our hearts) the object of our reverential awe and grateful adoration. He is almighty and all-bounteous ; we are weak and dependent, hence prayer and every other sort of devotion. ‘ He is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to everlasting life,’ consequently it must be in everyone’s power to embrace his offer of ‘ everlasting life,’ otherwise he could not, in justice, condemn those

who did not. A mind pervaded, actuated and governed by purity, truth and charity, though it does not merit heaven, yet is an absolutely necessary prerequisite without which heaven can neither be obtained nor enjoyed; and by divine promise such a mind shall never fail of attaining 'everlasting life'; hence the impure, the deceiving and the uncharitable exclude themselves from eternal bliss by their unfitness for enjoying it. The Supreme Being has put the immediate administration of all this for wise and good ends known to Himself into the hands of Jesus Christ, a great personage, whose relation to Him we cannot comprehend, but whose relation to us is a Guide and Saviour; and who except for our own obstinacy and misconduct will bring us all through various ways and by various means to bliss at last.

"My creed is pretty nearly expressed in the last clause of Jamie Dean's grace, an honest weaver in Ayrshire, 'Lord, grant that we may lead a gude life; for a gude life makes a gude end; at least it helps weel.'"

"You see how I preach—I admire the close of a letter Lord Bolingbroke writes to Dean Swift, 'Adieu, dear Swift! with all thy faults I love thee entirely; make an effort to love me with all mine.'"

At a time of extreme anxiety, when Burns was being hounded by enemies and threatened with dismissal from his office because he had dared to express his disapproval of certain actions of the government, he wrote to John

Francis Erskine of Mar a letter in which he defines the duty of citizenship as it has seldom been defined, and which to-day, as then, sounds a trumpet call to duty. He writes :

“ You have been misinformed as to my final dismissal from the Excise ; I am still in the service, — indeed, but for the exertions of a gentleman, Mr. Graham of Fintray, who has ever been my warm and generous friend, I had without so much as a hearing, or the slightest previous intimation, been turned adrift with my helpless family to all the horrors of want. Had I had any other resource probably I might have saved them the trouble of a dismissal ; but the little money I gained by my publication is almost every guinea embarked to save from ruin an only brother, who, though one of the worthiest, is by no means one of the most fortunate of men. Now, sir, to the business in which I would more immediately interest you. The partiality of my countrymen has brought me forward as a man of genius and has given me a character to support. In the poet I have avowed manly and independent sentiments, which I trust will be found in the man. Reasons of no less weight than the support of a wife and family have pointed out as the only eligible line of life for me my present occupation. Still my honest fame is my dearest concern, and a thousand times have I trembled at the idea of those degrading epithets that malice or misrepresentation may affix to my name.

“ In your illustrious hands, sir, permit me

to lodge my disavowal and defiance of these slanderous falsehoods."

"Burns was a poor man from birth and an exciseman from necessity, but — I will say it, the sterling of his honest worth no poverty could debase, and his independent British mind, oppression might bend but could not subdue.

"I have three sons who I see already have brought into the world souls ill qualified to inhabit the bodies of slaves. Can I look tamely on and see any machination to wrest from them the birthright of my boys? No! I will not! should my heart's blood stream around my attempt to defend it. Does any man tell me that my full efforts can be of no service, and that it does not belong to my humble station to meddle with the concern of a nation? I can tell him that it is on such individuals as I that a nation has to rest, both for the hand of support and the eye of intelligence. "The uninformed mob may swell a nation's bulk, and the titled, tinsel, courtly throng may be its feathered ornament, but the number of those who are elevated enough in life to reason and reflect, yet low enough to keep clear of the venal contagion of a court, these are a nation's strength."

To do something to dissipate the mist gathered about the personality of Robert Burns has been my earnest and only wish to-night, for I know that the clearer the view and the closer the inspection of him the more there will be

found in him to admire, respect and love, and the more certainly will not only the splendor of his genius be revealed, but also the inherent strength and beauty of his character.

“ I see amid the fields of Ayr,
A ploughman, who in foul and fair
Sings at his task.
So clear, we know not if it is
The laverock’s song we hear, or his,
Nor care to ask.

“ For him the ploughing of these fields
A more ethereal harvest yields
Than sheaves of grain.
Songs flush with purple bloom the rye,
The plover’s call, the curlew’s cry
Sing in his brain.

“ Touched by his hand the wayside weed
Becomes a flower; the lowliest reed
Beside the stream
Is clothed with beauty; gorse and grass
And heather, where his footsteps pass,
The brighter seem.

“ At moments wrestling with his fate,
His voice is harsh, but not with hate.
The brush-wood hung
Above the tavern door lets fall
Its bitter leaf, its drop of gall
Upon his tongue.

“ But still the music of his song
Rises o’er all elate and strong,
Its master chords
Are Manhood, Freedom, Brotherhood;
Its discords, but an interlude
Between the words.”

— H. W. LONGFELLOW.

The Barta Press
Boston — New York

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